

Varieties of Female Gothic

Orientalist Gothic

Edited by
Gary Kelly



VARIETIES OF FEMALE GOTHIC



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Volume 6

Orientalist Gothic

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2002 by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

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BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Varieties of female gothic

1. Gothic revival (Literature) – Women authors 2. Gothic revival (Literature) – History and criticism

I. Kelly, Gary

823'.08729'0907

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Varieties of female gothic / general editor, Gary Kelly.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references

Contents: v. 1. Enlightenment gothic and terror gothic – v. 2. Street gothic – v. 3. Erotic gothic – v. 4–5. Historical gothic – v. 6. Orientalist gothic.

1. Horror tales, English. 2. English fiction – Women authors. 3. Gothic revival (Literature) – Great Britain. I. Kelly, Gary.

PR830.T3 V28 2001

823'.08729089287–dc21

2001021814

ISBN-13: 978-1-85196-717-9 (set)

Typeset by P&C

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INTRODUCTION

John Drew, in his comprehensive examination of 'India and the Romantic Imagination', describes Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* (3 vols, 1811) as 'oriental Gothic'.¹ Here I will argue that a more apt definition would be 'Orientalist Gothic', and that, as such, Owenson's novel, like the others in this set, addresses particular as well as general issues in the literature, culture and politics of its time. Some idea of the location of *The Missionary* in its historical moment can be gathered from the fact that negotiations between its author and publisher were managed by a leading politician and concluded in his coach. The politician was Castlereagh, momentarily out of office over failures in British campaigns against Napoleon, but soon to return to office as foreign secretary the year after *The Missionary* was published. At that moment Sydney Owenson (1776–1859) was already famous, for four related reasons. She was personally attractive, with a number of socially well-placed admirers. She had developed a public identity as the female embodiment of a liberal Romantic idea of Ireland. This role she performed for the titled and powerful of Ireland and England in the drawing rooms of their country mansions and town houses, and particularly the Dublin and London houses of her patrons, the Marquis and Marchioness of Abercorn. Lastly, she also embodied this role in fiction as the author of a series of successful novels in the new genre of the 'national tale', or story dealing with a region's or nation's culture, history and identity through familiar plots of love and courtship. This introduction will first describe Sydney Owenson's social formation as a promoter of liberal Romantic nationalism, then relate her work to the aristocratic reform movement within the governmental and imperial administration of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and to the Romantic Orientalism that was part of it. It will then go on to survey the development of her fiction up to *The Missionary*, and consider *The Missionary*, in particular, as an example of Orientalist Gothic.

Owenson let on that she was born on board ship between England and Ireland, thereby suggesting that she had a particularly 'British' identity for an age

1 John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 241.

that saw the emergence of new models of nation and empire.¹ Owenson's father, Robert (originally MacOwen or MacEon) was an Irish singer and actor who specialised in stock Irishman roles, in which he larded his speeches with bits of Gaelic. His wife, Jane (Hill) was an Englishwoman, the daughter of a merchant in Shrewsbury, and disliked Ireland. Robert Owenson was taken by an English gentleman to London for education in music and other subjects. Though given a Protestant education, Owenson claimed extensive Irish kin, including Oliver Goldsmith, and he had picked up a vast store of Irish song, anecdote and legend. Jane Owenson was resolutely pious and respectable, and gave her daughters Sydney and Olivia a thorough training in the Bible and domestic craft. After Owenson quarrelled with his employer Richard Daly, the notoriously licentious Dublin theatre proprietor, he opened his own theatre in Fishamble Street, Dublin, strongly supported by the Anglo-Irish landed and professional classes who were at that moment claiming greater independence for Ireland from its colonial ruler, Britain. Art and politics would always be linked for the Owensons. The loyalist-dominated Irish parliament suppressed the theatre, and Owenson had to return to Daly's company. The Owensons' infant son died, and they informally adopted a gifted ragamuffin, Thomas Dermody, who became the Owenson sisters' companion. When Jane Owenson died, the sisters were placed in a Huguenot Calvinist boarding school at Clontarf, now part of Dublin, and after three years, in a finishing school in Dublin, to prepare them for the marriage market. Owenson fell out with Daly again, and some aristocratic friends helped him set up a theatre in Kilkenny, in the south, which opened in August 1794, but quickly failed. Now educating herself, Sydney studied literature and science, and took up writing. She also spent a lot of time with her father in the west of Ireland, where he had a theatre at Sligo.

It, too, failed, in 1798, and a family friend procured Sydney a position as governess with the Featherstonehaugh family of Bracklin Castle, Westmeath, in the centre of Ireland, where she continued reading, and writing verse and fiction. While staying at the Featherstonehaughs' Dublin house, Sydney and her sister met Thomas Moore, rapidly becoming the most popular Irish poet, who would become a leading literary spokesman for Irish identity, culture and rights. Soon Sydney Owenson published her own book, *Poems* (1801), dedicated to her father's friend and Thomas Dermody's one-time patron, Lady Moira. The Moiras were members of a new generation of aristocrats promoting economic and social modernisation, reform and the professionalisation of government and its administration. Like the Moiras, many of these progressive aristocrats were

1 I am indebted for biographical details to *Lady Morgan's Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries and Correspondence* (2 vols, London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1862); Lionel Stevenson, *The Wild Irish Girl: The Life of Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan (1776–1859)* (1936; New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), which follows *Lady Morgan's Memoirs* closely, adding some details from other memoirists; and Mary Campbell, *Lady Morgan: The Life and Times of Sydney Owenson* (London: Pandora, 1988), which adds more details of the social context.

located in the Irish and Scottish peripheries of the new United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and they would transform the British state and Empire under the pressure of the Napoleonic wars. Sydney Owenson continued corresponding with Dermody, and after spending some time with her father, who now had a small theatre at Coleraine, she was engaged by the Crawfords of Fort William, Tipperary. During her many stays and visits in various parts of Ireland she had picked up a good number of Irish ways, to add to the stories, songs and pastiches of Irish culture she had acquired from her father. She also sensed the pressing need for national and imperial reorganisation circulating among her hosts and their guests in many a country mansion and elegant town house. At such aristocratic gatherings Sydney Owenson was beginning to be known for her 'Irish' songs and dances, and her ability to provide amusingly ethnic entertainment. Owenson was constructing herself as an embodiment of Irishness for the consumption of the Anglo-Irish ruling class, who were well-connected both to the British ruling class and the new colonial administrators.

Sydney's construction of herself as the epitome of Irishness for such people was timely. The Irish rebellion of 1798 had frightened the Anglo-Irish ruling class and alarmed the British government. Social and political conflicts in Britain, Europe, and its colonies threatened the break-up of countries, states and empires. Militant French Revolutionary patriotism and Napoleonic imperialism provoked development of 'national' identities and cultures throughout Europe and its colonies. The Union of Ireland with Great Britain at the end of 1800 was designed in part to answer the challenge of regionalism and nationalism within the British isles, and Sydney Owenson had been well educated, in her home and outside it, to respond to this, in person and in writing. Her achievement would be to bring together broad cultural movements in order to address the situation of the United Kingdom and its Empire in the Revolutionary aftermath and Napoleonic crisis. That ability is intimated in her first novel, *St. Clair; or, The Heiress of Desmond*, published at Dublin in 1802 and republished the following year at London, with a third edition, 'corrected and much enlarged', in 1812. Like *The Missionary*, it represents two lovers with intensely communing subjectivities set in a picturesque and sublime landscape. While this landscape validates their passion, the lovers are prevented in the end from uniting. The novel draws on European literary antecedents in the proto-revolutionary culture of Sensibility, in particular Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1756–8), Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther* (1774), and Bernardin de St Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1787). Readers could be expected to recognise these literary antecedents, which were influential texts of the culture of Sensibility, but which were also coming to be strongly associated with liberal, reformist politics across Europe. Though the social values and politics of the literature and culture of Sensibility were widely seen as the inspiration for French Revolutionaries and their European sympathisers, by the time Owenson's novel was published, Sensibility was becoming appropriated to a post-Revolutionary and anti-Napoleonic culture that would emerge as liberal Romanticism.

There is another important dimension of literary reference in *St. Clair*. A trait of all Owenson's fiction is its use of literary reference and allusion, and here there are plentiful references to 'Ossian' – purported to be a Celtic bard of ancient Scotland, but in fact a fabrication of the clergyman James Macpherson as the voice of a once unified 'national' culture supposedly shared by all classes. Though mostly fictitious, Ossian was a central figure in what Katie Trumpener has called 'bardic nationalism'.¹ This was the tendency of certain scholars and writers to base a unifying ideology of 'national' identity, history and destiny on a supposedly original, though now fragmentary or corrupted, culture. Representing themselves as 'national' bards, such scholars and writers proposed that this original 'national' culture could and should be retrieved or restored to reconcile present social conflicts, to transform the existing order and to create a new national self-consciousness. Ossian alone had a tremendous influence throughout Europe – Ossian was Napoleon's favourite poet.² Figures such as Ossian and bardic nationalist texts generally draw on national topography as well as social relations and cultural forms to constitute the 'national' subject – i.e., the nation internalised in the character and consciousness of the individual subjectivity, and the individual subject as representative of the nation. Accordingly, *St. Clair* also draws on Owenson's knowledge of Irish landscape and culture, for Ireland is the setting here. What Owenson does in *St. Clair* is to place Ireland – or her version of Ireland – in the political context of the new Romantic nationalism that had absorbed central elements of the earlier culture of Sensibility. *St. Clair*'s Irish topography and cultural references, together with its Ossianism and echoes of certain leading novels of Sensibility, are designed to eclipse the realities of Revolutionary violence, including the Irish Rebellion of 1798, and transform the novel of Sensibility into a pioneering text of the new, liberal Romantic nationalism.

The novel does so through the representation of its protagonists' and especially its heroine's subjectivity. The novel's heroine, who bears the name of Owenson's sister, Olivia, embodies Ireland, and especially its culture, figured as a product of its landscape. Furthermore, this identity is distinctively feminine, and even feminist. Olivia declares that her education has not imposed on her the usual 'prejudices' – or merely social values and conventions – acquired by women subjected to the ideology and culture of fashionable, courtly society. In other words, Owenson constructs Olivia as the kind of sovereign subject that was the model for political liberals across Europe. Moreover, Olivia's subjectivity is supposedly 'natural' and Irish in a way that internalises the national landscape and the 'national' culture of the people. Yet Olivia's subjectivity is also disciplined in a way centrally important to the middle class reading public of Owenson's day, and thus brings together discourses of both middle and lower

1 Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

2 Frank McLynn, *Napoleon: A Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 256.

classes. It is the eponymous hero, St Clair, with his excessive subjectivity and indulgence in 'passion', who brings about the male competition resulting in his death at the hands of his rival for Olivia, and consequently her death from grief – another form of excessive subjectivity. Like many post-Revolutionary novels, *St. Clair* ostensibly warns against the subjective sensibility celebrated in the novels that it echoes, especially Rousseau's; at the same time it gives full and lyrical representation to that subjectivity and thus in a way celebrates it. This paradox, of the soul too beautiful to live in a world of social difference and conflict – not to mention a world of global imperial struggle – would be a central theme of Owenson's work and of both Romanticism and early nineteenth-century liberalism. The paradox is central to what I have elsewhere called the Romantic 'novel of passion' – 'passion' in the double sense of 'suffering' (the original sense) and 'powerful or overwhelming desire' (the later sense).¹ Such representations of passion obviously fascinated readers of the time, as striking figures of strong subjectivity, but also created anxiety over the issue of self-control. Not surprisingly, then, both reviewers and friends told Owenson that her glamorising representation of her protagonists' excessive subjectivities overrode the novel's warning against such extremes.²

Nevertheless the reception of *St. Clair* was generally appreciative. Encouraged by this, Owenson left her position as governess to follow her father again in his theatrical projects, and attempt a breakthrough to self-supporting authorship. With her sister, she joined her father at Strabane, county Tyrone, a dozen miles south of Londonderry. She published versions of two old Irish songs and a pamphlet defending the state of the theatre in Ireland. While staying with her father at Londonderry, she worked on a collection of Irish songs taken down from him; this was published in 1806 as *Twelve Original Hibernian Melodies: With English Words, Imitated and Translated from the Works of the Ancient Irish Bards*. The work participates in a wave of such works throughout Europe and elsewhere, ostensibly recovering and preserving a heritage of the 'national' culture. Owenson also worked on a long historical romance set in the France of Henri IV, published in 1806 as *The Novice of St. Dominick* (4 vols). This was the period of the bloody religious civil wars of late sixteenth-century France, which had been used throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by British political writers as a parallel to civil and religious divisions there, and as a warning against both excessive royal power and popular rebelliousness.³ Though her friend, Alicia Lefanu, had warned her against any open display of learning and acquiring the then pejorative appellation of 'bluestocking', Owenson's new work is noticeably, perhaps ostentatiously learned. It belongs to a class of Romantic

1 Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), pp. 43–4, 184–210.

2 Stevenson, *Wild Irish Girl*, pp. 58–9.

3 J. M. H. Salmon, *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

fiction that could be described as the ‘footnote novel’, with numerous references to historiographical and other works apparently designed to authenticate the fiction with fact. Critics of the time complained that mingling history and fiction would delude young readers and break down a major discursive distinction, leading ultimately to the subverting of reason and virtue – disciplined subjectivity – by delusive fantasy. Nevertheless, the reading public was showing an increasing appetite for such fictions, and as ever Owenson was quick to exploit such appetites.

In *The Novice* she takes the long-standing historical analogy between the French religious wars and British politics and adapts it to her own time in a way that would have been familiar to her readers. Any story set in times and places of historic civil discord, conflict or war could serve as a commentary on the situation of Britain and Europe in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic crisis. Ireland, however, was a special case. As in sixteenth-century France, Ireland around 1800 was the scene of often brutal and bloody conflict between a Protestant minority and a Catholic majority. After the Irish Rebellion of 1798 many of the Anglo-Irish gentry and aristocracy, including those whom Owenson knew, came to believe that only emancipation of the Catholics from their civil disabilities, or repeal of their legislated exclusion from full civil rights, civic offices, professions, and tolerance of their church and schools, would ensure security and prosperity, not only of Ireland but the United Kingdom. As the first and nearest of England’s colonies, Ireland was in many ways a test case for the Empire. Ireland was also an experimental laboratory for administrative and other reforms that many felt were needed to defend the Empire against competitors and to secure the state against new claimants for participation in the political process, especially dissident and politicised elements of the lower and lower middle classes.¹ It was these classes who supported violent revolution in many places, including Ireland. In July 1803 the uprising of the so-called United Irishmen, which was led by Robert Emmett and encouraged by Napoleon, revived concern over national unity and the reliability of Catholics and other disaffected groups. The rising was abortive; Emmett was caught, tried, convicted and hung; Protestant Orangemen renewed vigilante persecution of suspect, prominent, or outspoken Catholics; and Catholic peasant secret societies continued economic violence and intimidation against Anglo-Irish landowners in the countryside.

The Novice of St. Dominick addresses this continuing crisis in several ways. It re-inscribes bardic nationalism, here by extensive references to Provençal culture. Provençal minstrelsy, language and culture are represented as the expression of a libertarian, patriotic, independent and religiously tolerant people against centuries of attempts by outsiders to suppress them and assimilate them to the religion, culture and language of powerful neighbours. In fact, Owenson intended to call her novel *The Minstrel*, but her publisher persuaded her to change to the catchpenny title that suggested Gothic dimensions – con-

1 R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 290.

vent Gothic then being in full vogue. Certainly the parallel between Provence and Ireland was obvious enough. In fact, Provence would become an important symbol in Romantic liberalism through the early nineteenth century, largely through J. C. de Sismondi's *Littérature du Midi de l'Europe* (1813). As in *St. Clair*, Owenson builds *The Novice* around a female protagonist, here named Imogen, invoking a parallel to Shakespeare's romance *Cymbeline* which, as Carol Hart notes, 'resembles *The Novice* in its depiction of lost status, female heroism and bourgeois and aristocratic alliance'.¹ Owenson's Imogen has a complex subjectivity and many talents and in the course of the story undertakes a tour of French society and culture of the time, from which she learns the vanity, instability and treacherousness of fashionable courtly society and the evils of religious intolerance of both Protestants and Catholics. The liberal, reformist and patriotic purpose of the novel is indicated by the fact that Owenson travelled to London to get the work published by Richard Phillips, a well known English Jacobin, whose bookshop was a drop-in centre for reformist politicians and agitators, and such prominent and politically radical intellectuals as William Godwin.

Returning to Ireland, Owenson plunged into a new fiction project. This was designed to promote more directly the theatricalised version of Irish identity and culture she had taken over from her father and developed into both a literary discourse and a personal performance routine in the salons of those with direct political influence. In order to do so, Owenson again undertook formal innovation to achieve her political aims. Like the other politically motivated authors published by Phillips, Owenson understood that, though despised, the novel was the most widely read form of print, apart from newspapers and magazines, among the middle and upper classes. She would also have known that the next most widely read form of book was the travelogue.² At this time the travelogue was widely used to promote a combination of political, cultural and economic issues. Such travelogues often combined a distinctively individual narrating persona with a miscellany of entertaining yet politically pointed information about culture, society, politics, economic development and so on. New elements were also being absorbed into both the novel and the travelogue from the burgeoning research taking place into the historic culture of the common people, research that was appropriated or forged in texts of bardic nationalism.

These studies were called 'popular antiquities' at the time, and later came to be known as folklore. Such research had several functions. Knowledge of local

1 Carol Ann Hart, 'Domains of Difference: Gender, Class and Ethnicity in the Novels of Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan c. 1802–1811' (unpub. PhD diss., University of Alberta, 1996), p. 90.

2 See Charles L. Batten, Jr., *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1978); Percy G. Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

plebeian lore and social practices could assist programmes of economic, social and cultural modernisation, and ‘popular antiquities’ were often included in studies of regional topography, economic resources and infrastructure on which public policy for development was based. This was the case especially in the peripheries of the United Kingdom, considered most in need of, or open to, modernisation, to bring those regions into economic, social, cultural and, hence, political interdependence with the metropolis – in this case, England. Another important cultural use of research on ‘popular antiquities’ was in fabrication of a supposedly national identity from the agglomeration of local and regional identities in complex states, such as the United Kingdom. A less obvious but perhaps more important function of ‘popular antiquities’ was ideological, and thus political: such studies incorporated the culture of the common people into learned discourses commanded and practised by the professional middle classes and professionalised landowning class, thereby appropriating an alternative cultural and ideological domain to the interests and aims of those classes. Associated with this kind of work were the fakes, forgeries, fabrications and imitations, ranging from Macpherson’s ‘Ossian’ through the art ballads or imitation ‘folk’ ballads produced by writers such as Walter Scott, to the partly original, partly traditional songs such as those published by Owenson in *Twelve Hibernian Melodies*.

A travelogue-novel could give such materials a wider readership, and this could be especially true for a work dealing with Ireland. The Union of Ireland and Great Britain had shifted party political power, making the government at Westminster dependent on the new Members of Parliament from Ireland. William Pitt and the government, along with many officials sent to govern Ireland, favoured emancipation of Roman Catholics from their historic civil disabilities, but emancipation was vehemently opposed by many Anglo-Irish landowners, by Orangemen, or intransigent middle class Irish Protestants, and by many in England – where Catholics had long been regarded as subservient to a foreign power and thus unpatriotic. In fact, as Linda Colley has argued, ‘English’ national identity was partly formed as anti-Catholic.¹ Catholic emancipation was opposed with particular vehemence by George III. Yet it was clearly a desirable political option at that moment. The Rebellion of 1798, the uprising of the United Irishmen in 1803, the ensuing bloody and cruel repression of Irish peasants, parliament’s rejection of a petition from Irish Catholics in 1805 and continuing fear of Napoleon’s military intervention placed the ‘Irish question’ in the forefront of British politics. At the same time, the Union had aroused expectations among all classes of Irish Catholics, including the remaining aristocrats, and many feared that delay of emancipation would precipitate another bloody revolution.² Resolving the ‘Irish question’ had become critical to

1 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

2 Ursula Henriques, *Religious Toleration in England 1787–1833* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 138–43.

the government's stability, to national unity, and perhaps to imperial survival. Owenson could not be addressing a more important issue in 1805.

She prepared for her task by study of books, by field research in Connaught in the west of Ireland – long regarded as the most 'Irish' part of the country – and by consulting experts such as the Irish antiquarian Joseph Cooper Walker.¹ She described her project to Phillips, but he recommended casting the work as a series of letters in travelogue form, like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's often reprinted *Letters ... Written during Her Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa* (1763–7), or publishing a series of factual reports in epistolary form in his liberal periodical, the *Monthly Magazine*, followed by book publication. She stuck to the travelogue-novel, however, and finished her work early in 1806. Knowing what she had, she demanded £300 from Phillips. When he demurred, she went to the firm of Joseph Johnson. Johnson was the leading publisher of the English jacobins, including Godwin, and Revolutionary feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays. Johnson also published two of the leading Anglo-Irish promoters of modernisation – Richard Lovell Edgeworth and his daughter Maria, whose *Castle Rackrent: An Hibernian Tale* (1800) had already broken the ground in fictionalising Irish national identity and culture. Owenson intended to call her work *The Princess of Inismore*, but her friend John Wolcot, known as 'Peter Pindar' and for his verse satires on current affairs, suggested 'The Wild Irish Girl'. After a somewhat erotically suggestive correspondence, Phillips came up with the £300, exulting that '*The Wild Irish Girl* is mine, to do with her as I please!'² Such punning with titles was common at the time, and Phillips's freedom of expression, which might have seemed ungentlemanly to some, was a cultural marker of liberal, avant-garde circles, carried over into liberal writing, and was widely deplored by conservative critics and writers. The erotic, Owenson was aware, and as her fiction and the critical response to it would demonstrate, had powerful political resonance.

The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale was published by Phillips in three volumes in 1806 and was an immediate sensation. This was the first of a series of fictions to receive the new generic designation 'national tale', though there were a number of eighteenth-century novels that incorporated regional colour and culture from the margins, especially Scotland and Wales, but also Ireland. The latter included novels by Sarah Butler (*Irish Tales*, London, 1716), William Chaigneau (*The History of Jack Connor*, 2 vols, London, 1752), Thomas Amory (*The Life of John Bunclie, Esq.*, 2 vols, London, 1756), Frances Sheridan (*Memoirs of Miss Sidney Biddulph*, 3 vols, London, 1761, and *Conclusion ...*, 1767), Thomas Leland (*Longsword, Earl of Salisbury*, 2 vols, London, 1762) and Regina Maria Roche (*The Children of the Abbey: A Tale*, 4 vols, London, 1796).³ There was also

1 Walker was a literary correspondent of another pioneering woman political novelist, Clara Reeve; see Introduction to Reeve in volume 1 of this edition.

2 Stevenson, *Wild Irish Girl*, p. 77.

3 Ian Campbell Ross, review of *The Wild Irish Girl*, ed. Claire Connolly and Stephen Copley (2000), in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 14:2 (January 2002), p. 227.

Maria Edgeworth's recent and successful *Castle Rackrent* (1800), although Edgeworth aimed to show how the Irish gentry and peasantry degraded each other and therefore needed modernisation and union with Britain.

The term 'tale' had long been used as a generic label for relatively short narratives, usually fictitious, originally supposed to be derived from oral 'folk' narratives but collected in compilations of various lengths since antiquity. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, the term came to be used in English to indicate a fiction different from the full-scale, multi-volume 'modern novel' or 'romance' that had many characters, incidents and settings and usually dealt with fashionable upper class society. 'A Tale' on the title page invited the reader to expect a simpler narrative, focused on a few characters in a particular location and probably dealing with common life and local, quotidian events. By 'National Tale' Owenson seems to have meant such a fiction dealing with issues and representing characters, incidents and settings supposedly characteristic of a 'nation', or people with a distinct language, culture, history and identity. Subsequent novels identified on their title pages as 'national tales' include *O'Donnel* (3 vols, 1814) by Owenson (by then Lady Morgan), *Clan-Albin* (4 vols, 1815) by Christian Isobel Johnstone, *The Matron of Erin* (3 vols, 1816) by a 'Matron of Honour', *Edgar* (3 vols, 1816) by 'Miss Appleton', and *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (4 vols, 1827) by Lady Morgan. Though the designation was not used often, the form of the 'national tale' would be the characteristic genre of liberal Romantic nationalism through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, especially as restructured by Walter Scott and his numerous imitators, around the globe.

In fact, *The Wild Irish Girl* is an epistolary novel, in which H. M., a decadent young English aristocrat, writes to his partner in fashionable dissipation, J. D. Esq., M. P., his impressions of Ireland. H. M. has been sent there by his father, the Earl of M—, ostensibly to visit his Irish estates but in fact to detach him from his dissolute associates and way of life. Arrived at M— House on the north-west coast of Connaught, H. M. is surprised by the beauty of the country, the energy, simplicity and honesty of the common Irish, and by the cultivation – without loss of 'national' authenticity – of the Irish Catholic aristocracy, represented by Glorvina, the 'wild Irish girl', and her father, the Prince of Inismore. The Inismores once owned the estates of the area and their ancestor was murdered by the Earl of M—'s forebear when Ireland was seized by the English. Even Catholicism wears a benign face in Ireland, represented by the learned, wise, and virtuous Father John, the Inismores' chaplain. The phrase 'wild Irish' was an English usage found in medieval writing to indicate the Irish living beyond the reach of English rule, and later the phrase came to mean the 'less civilised' Irish, that is, those not anglicised sufficiently, in the eyes of the English.¹ Owenson aims to turn the slur into a celebration, for the jaded English narrator finds that though the 'wild Irish girl' is certainly the embodiment of

1 *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Ireland's uncorrupted soul, or culture, spirit and 'national' character, she can quote Tasso as well as sing Irish folksongs, and that his own decadently civilised soul is refreshed, restored, and reformed by her. Posing as an artist, he undertakes to tutor Glorvina in drawing in exchange for an informal degree course in Irish language, history, topography, flora and fauna, cultural anthropology, 'popular antiquities' and political economy (including the way his father's English steward exploits the Irish tenants and defrauds his employer). Thanks to extensive footnotes, the reader is informed even more fully than is H. M.

With this kind of interchange of minds and souls carried on amidst validating picturesque nature – and in countryside that, in different senses, belongs to both the Princess of Inismore and himself – H. M. inevitably comes to desire further physical and legal union. As in literary romance and in marriages of state, such a union would echo the Union of Ireland and Great Britain. There are, also inevitably, obstacles, to which Owenson gives a Gothic shading and setting. Glorvina's first duty is to her ailing and impecunious father; H. M. fears his father's disapproval. H. M. learns that a figure of satisfactorily Gothic obscurity had appeared annually, apparently from England, and engaged in mysterious interviews with the Prince of Inismore. At the same time, H. M. learns that his father is to arrive, with H. M.'s arranged betrothed and her father, who turn out to be vulgar, shallow and mercenary. The 'Conclusion', by a third-person narrator, recounts the Gothic denouement: in a gloomy chapel H. M. comes upon the marriage ceremony of Glorvina to the obscure stranger. Rushing forward, H. M. finds that the intended bridegroom is none other than his own father who, by the marriage, intended to erase the wrongs and divisions of the past by a union in the present. With that disclosure, the happy ending unfolds, H. M. and Glorvina wed, and the novel closes with the Earl of M—'s epistolary blessing on the symbolically and exemplarily British couple. As Lionel Stevenson observes, the hero's 'falling in love with Glorvina is taken as a matter of course, and his falling in love with Ireland is the real theme'.¹ The plot represents England's desire for Ireland, in which a forcible violation in the past is repaired by a culturally, intellectually and morally validated mutual erotic desire leading to conjugal union in the present, though shadowed by a Gothic alternative possibility.

The representation of desire is reinforced by the lyrical language of the male protagonist and principal narrative voice, H. M. This lyricism has an erotic dimension that could be indicative of the eroticism of courtly decadence, widely deplored at the time as a symptom of Britain's dangerous national moral decline, possibly leading to military failures and imperial disaster. The novel opens by strongly associating H. M. with that kind of courtly eroticism and decadence, but the novel's plot aims to demonstrate that desire can be educated and reformed by 'national' culture and landscape to a politically conciliatory, culturally harmonising, socially unifying, and patriotically responsible role. The

1 Stevenson, *Wild Irish Girl*, p. 72.

erotic, or a certain form of the erotic, is thus central to Owenson's form of liberal Romanticism, redeployed in different ways throughout her fiction, from *St. Clair* on. It is a form of libertarian subjectivity, the assertion of a sovereign subjectivity but also, as here and elsewhere in her fiction and that of certain contemporaries, close to libertine subjectivity. Because of this propinquity, some of Owenson's readers and critics deplored the erotic element in her work, or saw it as colluding with libertine eroticism and thus with the courtly decadence widely seen as a major cause of Britain's domestic and international crisis. Richard Lovell Edgeworth wrote to Owenson praising *The Wild Irish Girl* for its representation of 'the lower Irish', Father John's 'sound and judicious observations', and the cleverly inserted information on Irish history, but he diplomatically criticised the lush language.¹ The two related charges of excessive eroticism and overwriting continued to be applied to Owenson's writing by critics down to the twentieth century. Such charges had been associated with reformist, then pro-Revolutionary, then liberal writing from the Della Cruscan controversy of the late 1780s, at least, and these associations were exploited by a number of women writers, including Mary Robinson in the 1790s and Charlotte Dacre in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Owenson was consciously writing in that line. Ina Ferris has noted the difficulty that Owenson/Morgan posed to her contemporaries, centred in the erotic quality of her writing: 'If Morgan's high-coloured sensibility threatened the decorum of femininity through a female excessiveness, her ambition challenged it through an assumption of masculine power.'² This 'excessiveness' was widely understood as an aspect of her politics, however.

These politics of theme and style were recognised at the time, and reacted to accordingly. *The Wild Irish Girl* was received enthusiastically on the whole in Ireland, but a paper war soon broke out led by John Wilson Croker, probably quietly encouraged for a time by the British-appointed administration in Dublin. At that moment this administration was following the policy of the government in London by rejecting calls for Catholic emancipation and greater autonomy for Ireland. Other readers and critics defended Owenson and her novel, declaring the work to be an accurate and overdue positive representation of Irish history, culture and society. Then the British government decided to take a more conciliatory line toward the Irish and ordered the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Duke of Bedford, to demonstrate the fact. At that moment Owenson was planning to mount an opera, capitalising on her novel's textualisation of a gentrified and idealised version of Irish identity culture, dress, song and language by again staging her and her father's performative embodiment of them. *The First Attempt; or, The Whim of the Moment*, with Robert Owenson in his char-

1 R. L. Edgeworth to Sydney Owenson, 23 December 1806, in *Lady Morgan's Memoirs*, vol. 1, pp. 293–4.

2 Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 48.

acteristic Irishman role, opened in spring 1807. It was attended by the Lord Lieutenant and his suite, leading garrison officers and pro-emancipation lawyers and professionals. At the same time, Sydney Owenson published *The Lay of an Irish Harp* with Phillips, hitting the market from another angle while her name was still before the public. Owenson had now become the public symbol of Irishness, for some, at least. Later in the year, she came to her subject from yet another quarter with *Patriotic Sketches of Ireland, Written in Connaught*, a travelogue of the kind favoured by reformists and liberals as a way of grounding proposals for change based on observation. The book uses anecdote to advance a wide range of detailed national and local reform proposals. Politically and discursively, then, *Patriotic Sketches* was a kind of non-fiction sequel and counterpart to *The Wild Irish Girl*.

Owenson was now playing to her main chance both socially and professionally. Aristocratic Anglo-Irish ladies ignored Owenson as a social phenomenon, but the aristocratic English ladies associated with the Irish administration turned the 'wild Irish girl' – both the fictional character and her author – into a fashion moment, demanding that jewellers create copies of the 'Glorvina ornament', while dressmakers produced a 'Glorvina mantle'. Owenson and her harp and 'Irish' items of dress and ornament were more in demand than ever in Dublin salons, while Owenson was also sought out, sometimes with a politically liberal element of flirtation, by leading cultural and political men, such as the scientist Richard Kirwan and the barrister Sir Charles Montague Ormsby. Early in 1808 she visited London and found that 'Glorvina' was the social rage among aristocratic Whig high society, though the price she had to pay for admission to these circles was to stay in role. Through a combination of public and literary self-construction she had become an important public intellectual, and she proceeded to serve those who 'employed' her to promote their cultural, social and political policies.

Another woman with a similar public role had just created a literary and political sensation with her novel *Corinne; ou, l'Italie* (3 vols, London and Paris, 1807). Germaine Necker, Baronne de Staël-Holstein, known as Madame de Staël, was the daughter of Louis XVI's prime minister at the outbreak of the French Revolution. She associated with the moderate Girondin faction in the early years of the Revolution and then, forced out of France by Napoleon, she led an international salon of intellectuals and liberals from exile. *Corinne* had an enormous impact throughout Europe, and especially on women writers. Its eponymous heroine is represented as the contemporary national bard of an Italy enslaved for centuries by foreign and despotic powers. Corinne embodies the spirit of both ancient republican Rome and a future independent Italy, and for much of the novel she gives a guided tour of the now ruined Roman glories of Italy's national and imperial past, accompanied by lectures on Italian culture, literature, and history. In these respects, she resembled Owenson's Glorvina. *Corinne* is in effect a novelised handbook of liberal Romantic nationalism across Europe. In the end, however, Corinne herself is crushed by the conflict between

her public identity and patriotic responsibilities on the one hand and the personal absolute of romantic love on the other. In this, she represents the ‘beautiful soul’ of the European middle-class ideology of the sovereign subject who is exiled, or self-exiled, within her own country by the unreformed state of its society, culture and government. In the case of the national voice such as Corinne, this subjectivity may be fatally forced back on itself, but nevertheless disburdens its afflicted selfhood in patriotic artistic expression.

In fashionable London society Owenson discovered that, thanks to *The Wild Irish Girl*, she was called ‘the Irish Corinne’. The association soon opened new opportunities for her. Owenson and her harp quickly became featured entertainment at the London soirées of the Countess of Cork and Orrery, the leading society hostess of the day. Through her, Owenson met William Gell, who suggested she apply her version of the liberal Romantic ‘national tale’ to Greece, then still under Turkish rule but becoming a leading cause for European liberals, enabling the expression of political views and protest that would, in many European countries, otherwise be banned. Gell supplied Owenson with information and a research plan and she went to stay with her mother’s relatives in Shrewsbury to novelise her findings. She continued to write on through a busy season of socialising and celebrity in Ireland, and finished her novel in the autumn. It was published as *Woman; or, Ida of Athens* (4 vols, 1808).

In its eponymous heroine Owenson combines four female figures (at least). There is a Greek version of ‘the wild Irish girl’. There is the Corinne figure. There is the figure of the intellectual woman, also known at the time pejoratively as the ‘bluestocking’ and positively as the ‘female philosopher’ (such as Mary Wollstonecraft) and already represented in Owenson’s earlier novels. Finally, there is in Ida what the reading public by now would be able to recognise as a version of Sydney Owenson. This composite figure is set in a plot that reworks elements of *The Wild Irish Girl* and *Corinne*, with particular political implications. The decadent English aristocrat reappears, and a darker version of the melancholy but virtuous Lord Nelvil in *Corinne*. Unlike H. M. in *The Wild Irish Girl*, however, the foreign suitor remains unredeemed by the heroine. Ida’s lover is a Greek patriot, forced into exile after an unsuccessful revolt against the foreign ruler – in this case, the Turks. Like the Irish ‘wild geese’ – patriot Catholic exiles – he flees his conquered native land to serve a foreign power, rising to the rank of general in the Russian army. Exiled herself, Ida nearly starves in London before coming into a fortune. Catapulted by chance from the depths to the heights of ‘society’, Ida, like Owenson, performs her country’s culture before fashionable society. Like Imogen in *The Novice of St. Dominick*, Ida discovers the shallowness and unreliability of such people. Finally, thanks to the English aristocrat, Ida and her patriotic Greek lover are reunited.

Owenson designed her composite heroine for several effects. Ida continues to project the embodiment of the ‘national’ identity and culture as female and feminine, the more effectively to dramatise ‘her’ resistance to a masculinist regime of oppression, at the same time suggesting that the liberal nationalist revolution

must include women. Like Corinne, Glorvina and Owenson the public performer, Ida is a mobilised form of the 'national' culture, and her character is constructed to suggest that the liberal Romantic nation-state will be achieved through the conventionally 'feminine' domain of culture rather than through the violent revolutions or armed movements of guerrilla warfare or national armies that were, as the novel was published, already active in various places in Europe and the New World. Ida's combination of Enlightenment ideas, culture of Sensibility, and 'national' (i.e., folk) culture suggests a programme for constructing national cultural identities. Similar programmes were in fact instituted by new liberal states in education and arts policy through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not surprisingly, then, the novel contains extensive discussions of educational theory and practice, generally advocating the kind of liberal, permissive education designed to produce distinctive, individual, sovereign subjects – the model for the citizen of the liberal state. The broad invitation to the reader to identify protagonist and author (reinforced here by Owenson's highly personal prefatory apology, representing herself as a spontaneous national voice) claims the authority of personal experience for the representation of female patriot. 'Woman', embodied in Ida of Athens, is the exemplary sovereign subject of the modern liberal state which does not yet exist but – in Ida's Greece, as in Corinne's Italy and Glorvina/Owenson's Ireland – which is embodied in this subject, and waiting to be expressed in a political, constitutional reality.

Owenson changed publishers for *Woman; or, Ida of Athens*, leaving Phillips for the more politically mainstream firm of Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown. Though her new publisher expressed concern that the liberal opinions in the book would harm sales,¹ Owenson counter-argued that controversy was more likely to boost them. Like its predecessor, her new novel certainly became a political-aesthetic bone of contention between liberals and conservatives. The leading Anti-Jacobin polemicist William Gifford, who during the 1790s had satirised the Della Cruscans and various women writers and founded the *Anti-Jacobin* magazine, attacked the novel in the first number of the new *Quarterly Review*, just established by a group of Scottish and English Tories and edited by Gifford to oppose liberal and Whig magazines such as Phillips's *Monthly Magazine* and the *Edinburgh Review*. Undeterred, Owenson soon embarked on a new fiction, combining elements of the 'national tale' and the new historical romance with aspects of the novel of passion and the Gothic romance, informed by Romantic Orientalism. At the same time, Owenson agreed to join the household of the Marquis of Abercorn and his wife as a permanent guest. The Abercorns were wealthy aristocrats with estates in Ireland and elsewhere, and with manor houses in county Tyrone, Ireland, and at Stanmore, near London. The Marquis was a Tory but the Abercorns followed the practice of the day in entertaining politicians, intellectuals, writers and artists of diverse political,

1 Stevenson, *Wild Irish Girl*, p. 114.

social and religious commitments. Following her usual practice, Owenson researched her novel, using the libraries of the Abercorns, Sir Charles Montague Ormsby, and other friends.

Part of her routine as resident entertainer was to read freshly drafted parts of her manuscript aloud to the Abercorns and their guests. On one such occasion at Stanmore, among the auditors was Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh. Castlereagh was an Irish landowner and aristocrat, with estates in counties Down and Donegal (the latter the setting for *The Wild Irish Girl*). He had been a member of the Irish parliament and served in the Irish administration in the late 1790s. He supported the Union and Catholic emancipation as ways to ensure Ireland's loyalty and reliability in the larger struggle against Napoleon, but resigned when the King refused to allow emancipation or other measures favourable to Irish Catholics. After the Union, Castlereagh joined the British government under Addington and, while advocating strong measures to repress rebellion and dissidence, he advocated Catholic emancipation, relief of Irish Catholics from double tithes, and state payment of non-Anglican ministers. When Pitt returned as head of government, Castlereagh became secretary for war and colonial affairs, in which he supported the policies of another Irish peer, Richard Wellesley, Earl of Mornington, as governor general of India from 1797 to 1805. After the brief, Whig-dominated 'ministry of all the talents', which he could not support, Castlereagh returned to office under Portland and strongly promoted Wellesley's brother Arthur, later Duke of Wellington, as commander in Spain against Napoleon. The government's inability to defeat Napoleon was blamed on Castlereagh, however, which led to a duel with his government colleague, George Canning, and the subsequent resignation of both in 1809. This was when he met Owenson, and took it upon himself to secure publication of her new novel, presumably because he thought it promoted the same policies towards India and other colonies, including Ireland, as he did. He invited the publisher Stockdale to his office to discuss terms, and at a meeting with Stockdale and Owenson in his coach, he secured £400 for the work, published as *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* (3 vols, 1811).¹

The novel is set in the early seventeenth century, during the Catholic counter-Reformation and Spain's occupation of the Portuguese throne. The third-person narrator recounts the life of 'the missionary', a Portuguese nobleman of royal blood who abandons the world for the church, becoming a Franciscan monk and taking the name Hilarion, after a fourth-century saint who was known for his extraordinary asceticism and performance of miracles, by which he converted many pagans. The modern day Hilarion, too, acquires a reputation for superhuman holiness and, though a Franciscan rather than a Jesuit, and ambitious to achieve wonders, he follows the example of the historical St Francis Xavier (1506–52), famous co-founder of the Jesuit order and missionary to Asia from 1542 to his death. As papal legate, St Francis operated

1 Stevenson, *Wild Irish Girl*, p. 130.

from the Portuguese bastion of Goa on India's west coast, baptised some tens of thousands of Indians, and then moved on through the East Indies, Japan and an island off the coast of China, where he died. Hilarion's mission takes place against a background of multiple usurpations by armed forces – particularly of the Portuguese throne by the Spanish monarch, and of the Mogul throne of India by the Muslim prince, Aurengzeb. There is also a background of religious conflict, as the Hindus resisted, often violently, attempts by both Muslims and Christians to proselytise them. Seeking to overcome this resistance, Hilarion is led by a 'pundit', or learned man (who seems to be more like a freethinking 'philosopher' of the European Enlightenment) to fix on converting a famous Indian holy woman, Luxima, whom he sees at Goa. 'Luxima' is a version of 'Lakshmi', name of the Hindu goddess of prosperity, beauty and love. Hilarion learns that Luxima was widowed as a bride and then became a spiritual teacher and priestess under the protection of her grandfather, a Hindu priest. Hilarion believes that converting such a figure will make the conversion of her entire people possible. He follows her across intervening torrents, deserts and mountains to the paradisaal valley of Kashmir. He takes up residence in a cave near her isolated dwelling, an encounter occurs, then others, in which they debate the merits of their respective religions and values. As Martin Jarrett-Kerr puts it, 'For half the book ... they argue theology',¹ though the discussions have more to do with values and their implications for personal life and social relations in a broad context of European Enlightenment and liberal ideology. Luxima falls under the missionary's spell, but he falls in love with her. After he sees off a princely rival, Solyman Sheko, who is engaged in the family struggle over the Mogul throne, Luxima accepts Hilarion's religion without fully understanding it, out of love for him rather than theological conviction.

This means she becomes an outcast from her own people and believes she sees the spectre of one of their deities condemning her. Then, while sheltering in a vast temple of Gothic obscurity, she and Hilarion witness her ritual excommunication by her grandfather and attendants. Aware that she is an exile in her own land, and conscious of their sexual desire for one another, forbidden by both his religious vocation and by her former one, Hilarion and Luxima decide to obviate the 'crime' that may result by returning to Goa, where Luxima will be placed in a convent. Here there are extended debates between the missionary and his acolyte on the nature of faith and religion, in which Hilarion upholds the necessity of adhering strictly to principle and striving for perfection, while Luxima promotes a religion of love and acceptance of humanity. This part of the novel is also studded with quotations from, and allusions to, Milton's representation of the fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden in *Paradise Lost*. Recrossing a desert landscape of excellently Gothic horror, the fugitives join a caravan, but Hilarion is questioned about his mission and his beliefs by

1 Martin Jarrett-Kerr, 'Indian Religion in English Literature 1675–1967', *Essays and Studies* (1984), p. 93.

some hooded Europeans and then arrested by these men, who turn out to be officers of the Inquisition. Back at Goa, Luxima is placed in a convent and Hilarion tried for heresy by the Inquisition, convicted and handed over to the state for execution at the stake. Meanwhile, however, the pundit enables Luxima to escape from the convent and secretly stirs up the Hindu populace by claiming that Luxima the priestess is being forcibly converted. At the *auto da fe*, or execution, Luxima bursts from the crowd to throw herself on the fire about to consume Hilarion. The crowd reacts with violence, Hilarion rescues Luxima, who has lost her mind, and in the confusion they escape with the pundit's help, sheltering in a seaside cave. The rebellion is suppressed by force, but the missionary and his acolyte are never seen again. Ashes and remains of ritual cremation are found soon after in the cave, and years later a European 'philosopher', who is probably meant to be the early French Orientalist François Bernier (c. 1625–88, one of Owenson's sources), leaves the suite of the Mogul emperor Aurengzeb and visits the cave in Kashmir where local legends still tell of a European missionary-hermit and his unfortunate convert.

The formal elements of *The Missionary* are similar to those in Owenson's earlier work, with some adjustments of particulars appropriate to the new subject. These elements include a third-person narrator; protagonists in a relationship of passion, sympathetically retold by the narrator; stress on the erotic as both generalised and sexual desire; a correspondingly lyrical, expressive and hyperbolic style; few other characters, and these merely sketched; much local and cultural description, bolstered by footnotes; lengthy philosophical dialogues; selected Gothic elements, somewhat modified; a simple plot of a kind of courtship, here ending fatally rather than happily, with no subplots; and broad parallels to certain earlier Sentimental and contemporary Romantic novels, especially those dealing with lovers divided by social or other 'artificial' differences yet placed in intimate proximity and isolated from the rest of society, characteristically represented as irredeemably conflicted, hostile, and even violent. This formal structure is designed, as in the novels of Sensibility and Gothic romances that *The Missionary* takes after, to foreground conflicted and hence afflicted subjectivity – that is, subjectivity divided between a personal, subjective absolute, here erotic love, on the one hand and on the other hand ideology, or the internalised values of particular societies. In this case the values are those of militantly Catholic Europe and defensively exclusionist India, for in this novel ideology is presented as false consciousness. In short, the novel focuses on ideology and passion contending in masculine and feminine subjects that seek harmony and union. In the background, and heightening the meaning of that contention, is a complex and shadowy drama of continuing and often violent institutional, dynastic, nationalist and imperial struggles, local and global, set in the past but resonating powerfully with the present of the novel's readers.

Spain rules Portugal and its empire, against Portuguese resentment, resistance and eventual resurgence. The Spanish and Portuguese seek to colonise and convert Asia, against local resistance. The Papacy tries to dominate church